

AUGUST 4, 2025, FATHER JOHN BERTAIO

As I mentioned at the beginning, today we celebrate the feast of one of my favourite saints. I do hope I have a couple of minutes to share some of what I've learned about this saint over the years.

I must start by stating that when I started my studies at St. Augustine's Seminary in Toronto, I had a very difficult time with studies. My spiritual director, and a number of colleagues, suggested that I read the life of St. John Vianney. For me, the name did not mean very much. Yet, as I got more information on him, I learned so much more about this wonderful, wonderful man who, like me, had a difficult time in his studies.

Perhaps, even, my few words—weak as they may be—can encourage you. If you know of some man who is single, consider encouraging him to the vocation of the priesthood. No matter where we are in our life, if the Lord calls us to the priesthood, He wants us—no matter what the case might be.

Very briefly, our saint was born in Lyon, France in 1876 as a child who looked after his father's sheep. He loved to pray, and when he was 18, he asked his father for permission to join the priesthood. His father was very worried because he relied on him to look after the family farm. However, after some time, his father allowed him to study under the guidance of Father Bailey, who supported him until it was time to begin his seminary studies.

When he was in the seminary, he was very discouraged because he just couldn't grasp Latin and a few of the other required courses. But he never gave up. He went on a long pilgrimage to a popular place dedicated to St. Francis Regis in France. The pilgrimage didn't produce a miraculous change, but when he returned, he was never discouraged again.

Finally, John was able to continue in the seminary, though the studies remained difficult. At his final examinations—oral exams at the time—he was so nervous that he broke down and couldn't answer the questions. Father Bailey, who was present, spoke up for him and pointed out that John was a good and holy man. He was full of common sense and understood what the Church taught about the faith. It was agreed by the board that his qualities were sufficient for him to be ordained a priest.

He became Father Bailey's assistant until Father Bailey's death. Afterward, John was sent to a tiny place in France called Ars. Perhaps you've already heard of it. The people there had no use for Christianity or the Church. They were more interested in the bars, working seven days a week, and using bad language. Father John tried hard. He wanted his people to come back to God.

Eventually, one tavern after another shut down because business was slow. People began to say, "Our priest, our priest, he's a saint—we must obey him." That shows how much influence he had on those people.

God gave Father John the power to enter into people's minds, to know their sins, and even to see their future. Because of this great gift, he converted many sinners and helped people make the right decisions in life. Hundreds of pilgrims came to Ars each day, and St. John Vianney would spend 16 hours a day in the confessional—16 hours—bringing people back into union with God.

He remained in Ars for 42 years and died there in 1859 at the age of 73. He was proclaimed a saint in 1925. Today, he is venerated as the patron saint of priests.

One of his many qualities was his devotion to the Blessed Sacrament. He would spend hours in the presence of Jesus in the tabernacle. Though the

tabernacle was closed, he would sit there for hours. People would come into the church and see him just sitting there, staring at the tabernacle. When asked, “What are you doing?” he answered, “I’m looking at Jesus.” “And what’s he doing?” they asked. “He’s looking back at me.”

Next time you go into a church and sit in private, quiet prayer, look at Jesus. He sees you. And if you see him with your heart, he will see you back and give you the comfort that you need.

St. John Vianney is renowned for his profound wisdom and spiritual insights. His sayings emphasized the importance of prayer, the Eucharist, and the Blessed Virgin Mary—never forgetting our Mother. He stressed the need for humility, selflessness, and a deep love for God and neighbour.

The next time you have some time, visit your local church or chapel. Look for a tabernacle. Sit there. He knows you. He knows what you need, what your pains are, and what your joys are. Trust him. Trust Jesus no matter what. He will never, ever abandon you.

And please do encourage a young man you might know to consider the priesthood of Jesus Christ. If it’s possible for me, it’s possible for many others around.

God bless you.